



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SEPT. 22, 2010

CONTACT: GEORGE HARDEEN

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

OFFICE – 928-871-7917

CELL – 928-309-8532

pressoffice@opvp.org

Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., says legislation to redevelop Former Bennett Freeze Area promises ‘another great day’

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., has called news of proposed legislation to rehabilitate the former Bennett Freeze Area a great day for the people and the Nation.

“It was 17 months ago Tuesday that Congress officially repealed this dark chapter in our relationship with the federal government,” President Shirley said. “Thanks to the efforts our Navajo Hopi Land Commission and Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick, the promise of this legislation is another great day for my elderly, my medicine people, my young, and my grandchildren who have been affected by the Bennett Freeze for more than 40 years.”

The key component of the proposed “Former Bennett Freeze Area Redevelopment Act,” sponsored by Congresswoman Kirkpatrick, calls for establishing the Former Bennett Freeze Trust Fund. This trust fund would be used to improve the economic, housing, infrastructure, health, educational and social conditions of families and communities that have been affected by the Freeze.

“The Bennett Freeze stopped Diné and Hopi people from making even basic improvements to their homes for too long, and I am honored to have helped them make progress,” Congresswoman Kirkpatrick said in a statement. “Working together, we will fight to make Washington address the problems its policies have caused in Indian Country. This new legislation will help us bring critical infrastructure to the Freeze area and create a brighter future for our communities.”

The former Freeze area is 1.5 million acres in size and consists of nine western Navajo chapters in Coconino County. The effect of a freeze on all development and home repairs affected more than 12,000 Navajos.

Navajo Hopi Land Commission Office Executive Director Roman Bitsuie said that because there is not enough time this year to see the bill through to passage, he hopes it will be introduced soon and that Congressional hearings and action on the bill will be completed by early 2011.

“The promise of this legislation is another great day for my elderly, my medicine people, my young, and my grandchildren who have been affected by the Bennett Freeze for more than 40 years.”

– Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr.

He said the estimated cost to make home repairs and replacements, waterline upgrades, construct health and public safety facilities range from \$1 billion to \$4.5 billion.

The bill would extend the authorization of the Navajo Rehabilitation Trust Fund and repeal the obligation of the Navajo Nation to repay money advanced to the trust fund. The bill would assign the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation to conduct redevelopment activities, and allow the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe to contract redevelopment activities.

Public Law 93-638 allows tribes to contract functions performed by the federal government. Special legislation is needed to permit contracting from ONHIR because it is an independent agency within the federal executive branch.

The bill would authorize the Navajo Nation to negotiate and approve an Accommodation Agreement with the Hopi Tribe for Navajo families still residing on Hopi Partitioned Land and who intend to remain.

Director Bitsuie credited Congresswoman Kirkpatrick's role in passing legislation last year that repealed the Bennett Freeze from federal law.

"We have been working for months with Kirkpatrick's office on this legislation," he said. "The process has involved a lot of discussion, research and a field visit by her staff. The result is a draft bill that, if passed, would have an immediate and positive impact for the affected Navajo families and communities."

###